

JOHN WESLEY'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE: A DOCTRINAL ANALYSIS OF WESLEY'S THIRTEEN DISCOURSES ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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In the long history of discussion of the homilies on the Sermon on the Mount (SM)¹, much attention has been devoted to John Chrysostom's (c. 350-407) and Martin Luther's (c. 1483-1546) works.² However, as Albert C. Outler has pointed out, John Wesley's series of discourses on SM have not been discussed much by contemporary scholars.³ His thirteen discourses on SM were written in the years between 1748 and 1750, which falls at the end of the first decade (1739-1749) as well as the beginning of the second decade (1749-1759) of his revival ministry. Through these discourses, together with the other sermons written in the first decade of his revival ministry, Wesley attempted to provide pastoral care, Christian nurture and discipline to his converts and those of his brother, Charles. As such, they capture Wesley's vision of the Christian life which had been taking shape gradually since 1725.⁴

This paper seeks to analyse Wesley's thought on the Christian life in these discourses. It seeks to explore and answer the following questions: What is the importance of these discourses in Wesley's thinking? What is the nature of his understanding of the Christian

¹ Hereafter, SM is the abbreviation of the Sermon on the Mount.

² See Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount in Hermeneia-A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995), 11; Jaroslav Pelikan, "Divine Rhetoric: The Sermon on the Mount as Message and as Mode," in *Augustine, Chrysostom and Luther* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 67-96.

³ Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley's Sermons: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 53.

⁴ In this year, Wesley read Bishop Taylor's *Rules and Exercises of Holy Living and Dying*. This was followed by Kempis's *Christian Pattern* in 1726 and William Law's *Christian Perfection* and *Serious Call* a year or two after. These shaped his vision of the Christian life which shone forth after 1738.

life ? How is his understanding of help to Christians who are on their pilgrimage in the earth? Since this exploration is based on Wesley's thirteen discourses on SM, it is an initial, not exhaustive, exploration.⁵

1. The Invitation of the Kingdom of God

Wesley begins his discourses by expounding Matt. 5:3, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' What is this Kingdom of Heaven to which the Sermon on the Mount points? This is the 'Kingdom of Heaven' or 'Kingdom of God' which consists of two continuing dimensions, namely the Kingdom of Glory and the Kingdom of Grace.⁶ What, then, are these two dimensions of the one Kingdom? How do they link to each other? In what way does the Christian relate to this Kingdom?

1.1 The Kingdom of Glory

Based on biblical teachings, Wesley points out that the Kingdom of Glory is God's everlasting Kingdom in Heaven. It is the continuation and perfection of the Kingdom of Grace on earth.⁷ It is a new heaven and a new earth which only the righteous can dwell in (Isa. 55.17; 2 Pet. 3.13; Rev. 21.1-4). The old has passed away and the absolute newness has begun. "In the new earth, as well as the new heavens, there will be nothing to give pain, but everything that the wisdom and goodness of God can create to give happiness."⁸ It is in this newness that God will be with His people eternally and the righteous enjoy the perfect happiness in seeing the face of God.⁹ The beauty of the Kingdom of Glory is beyond human description. It could be explained only by eternity.¹⁰

What does this eternal newness imply? What kind of invitation does this eternal newness extend to those who are still on their

⁵ Throughout this paper, Wesley's language usage is left as expressed in his sermons. Where non-inclusive language is used in the original, it is retained, and where God is referred to as a male person, that too is retained.

⁶ Wesley expounds this in his discourse VI of SM (1748) on the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6: 1-15). John Wesley, Sermon 26, 'SM- VI,' *Works*, 1: 531-549.

⁷ Wesley, Sermon 26, 'SM-VI,' § III. 8., *Works*, 1: 581-2.

⁸ John Wesley, Sermon 60, 'The General Deliverance,' § III. 4, *Works*, 2: 446.

⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 15, 'The Great Assize,' § III. 5, *Works*, 1: 370; see also 'The New Creation,' § 18, *Works*, 2: 509.

¹⁰ John Wesley, Sermon 64, 'The New Creation,' §8, *Works*, 2: 503.

pilgrimage on the earth? These questions lead us into the inquiry of Wesley's view of the Kingdom of Grace.

1.2 The Kingdom of Grace

What is the Kingdom of Grace? On "The Way to the Kingdom" (1746), Wesley first defined what it is not. The Kingdom of Grace is neither meat and drink nor any outward thing, such as forms or ceremonies.¹¹ It is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14.17).¹² It is the nature of true religion. It presents in the human hearts when persons repent, believe in the name of Christ and receive Him as their king. It is just as a grain of mustard seed first sown in the heart, but eventually puts forth the fruits of righteousness.¹³ It is God's gifted remedy for fallen human beings that they may resume their lost righteousness, to be renewed and grow as better stewards of creation. It is spiritual and invisible. It could only be discerned through the conversion of sinners and the healing of the blind, the deaf and the lame.¹⁴ It is 'the Kingdom of God begun below, set up in the believer's heart.'¹⁵ Wesley further defines it:

It is termed "the kingdom of God," because it is the immediate fruit of God's reigning in the soul. So soon as ever he takes unto himself his mighty power, and sets up his throne in our hearts, they are instantly filled with this righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." It is called "the kingdom of heaven," because it is (in a degree) heaven opened in the soul.¹⁶

Coming to this point, we should not misinterpret Wesley's understanding of the Kingdom of God as a loose one. To him, "the kingdom is both a state on earth and a state in heaven."¹⁷ Hence, the terms Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven could be used interchangeably. We should also bear in mind Wesley's distinction between the Kingdom of Grace and the Kingdom of Glory. The

¹¹ John Wesley, Sermon 7, 'The Way to the Kingdom,' §§ I.1-2, *Works*, 1: 218.

¹² Wesley, Sermon 7, 'The Way to the Kingdom,' §§ I.1, 4, *Works*, 1: 218.

¹³ John Wesley, Sermon 33, 'SM- XIII,' § I.4, *Works*, 1: 690.

¹⁴ John Wesley, Sermon 66, 'The Signs of the Times,' §§II.3-4, *Works*, 2: 526.

¹⁵ Wesley, 'SM- VI' § III.8, *Works*, 1: 581.

¹⁶ Wesley, 'The Way to the Kingdom,' § I.12, *Works*, 1: 224.

¹⁷ John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1960), 127.

Kingdom of Grace is the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven which rests in human hearts. It is the spiritual locality where the Kingdom of Glory casts its light. The Kingdom of Glory or the fullness of the Kingdom of God will only take place in eternity. However, when the two are taken together, they are one kingdom.

With this background, we can further discuss the implication of the eternal newness of the Kingdom of Glory for those who are still on their pilgrimage on the earth. Since the Kingdom of Grace is where the Kingdom of Glory casts its light, the eternal newness could also be experienced by those upon whom the Kingdom of Grace rests. It is the eternal newness in the present. It provides the eschatological hope for those who are still on their pilgrimage towards the Kingdom of Glory.

In fact, as we read through these thirteen discourses, we can discern an eschatological optimism flowing through most of the discourses. This presents a strong sense of hope promised by the coming of the Kingdom of Grace. Those upon whose souls the Kingdom of Grace rests will experience the filling of righteousness, joy and peace by the Holy Spirit together with holiness and happiness.¹⁸ This is part of the experience of the eternal newness which we discussed in the previous section. And this is also the eternal promised goal of human life which will be perfected in the Kingdom of Glory.

The Kingdom of Grace, therefore, could also be understood as a kingdom of hope, which invites human beings to be pilgrims on a journey towards the Kingdom of Glory. However, those on their pilgrimage, although in the kingdom do not yet possess the kingdom in its fullness.¹⁹ They are on the journey of the Kingdom of Grace on earth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as well as walking in the light of the Kingdom of Glory. They are to live out the eternal newness in the present, that is the righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, while they are heading towards the fullness of the Kingdom of Glory with anticipation.

2. The Beginning of the Kingdom's Life

When does this begin? When human beings seek the Kingdom of God. To seek the Kingdom of God means to seek the sole dominion

¹⁸ Wesley, "The Way to the Kingdom," § I.12, *Works*, 1: 224.

¹⁹ John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation*, 127.

or the rule of God as the primary concern of the Christian's life. Wesley explains:

Before ye give place to any other thought of care, let it be your concern that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...may reign in your heart, may manifest himself in your soul, and dwell and rule there, that he may "cast down every high thing which exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ."²⁰

Wesley maintains that seeking for God's Kingdom is the essential path for all human beings who wish to begin their kingdom life. But how can they seek the Kingdom of God? 'Take heed and obey the Sermon on the Mount which Jesus Christ preached,' was Wesley's reply.

2.1 Listen to the Sermon on the Mount

To Wesley, SM is of crucial eschatological importance for it is Christ's loving revelation of the Father's will to human beings and their future generations. It describes the nature of godly righteousness with which human beings could see the Lord personally. It is 'the whole counsel of God with regard to the way of salvation,'²¹ and it is ultimately 'the path to heaven below and heaven above.'²² Thus, it concerns the present and the future state of the whole person.

For those who take heed and obey SM are the wise who build their house on the rock (Matt.7:24-25). They see the sound direction in securing and maintaining this house on the rock. This right decision affects their eschatological future. The End is always in Wesley's mind.

He indeed is wise, "who doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."...His soul is athirst for nothing on earth, but only for God...He knows himself...as a stranger and sojourner, in his way to the everlasting habitations; and accordingly he uses the world as not abusing it, and as knowing the fashion of it passes away...He sees, clearer than the light of the noon-day sun, that this is the end of man, to glorify Him who made him for himself, and to love and

²⁰ John Wesley, Sermon 29, 'SM- IX,' §20 , *Works*, 1: 642.

²¹ Wesley, Sermon 33, 'SM- XIII,' §1, *Works*, 1: 687.

²² John Wesley, Sermon 21, 'SM- I,' §8 , *Works*, 1: 474.

enjoy him forever. And with equal clearness he sees the means to that end, to the enjoyment of God in glory; even now to know, to love, to imitate God, and to believe in Jesus Christ whom he hath sent.²³

2.2 Receive the Gift of Righteousness

Other than seeking the Kingdom of God, the wise will also pray for the coming of the Kingdom of God. This is important for the Kingdom of God comes with its promised free gift of righteousness for human beings. Wesley elucidates:

It is meet for all those who love his appearing, to pray that he would hasten the time; that this his kingdom, the kingdom of grace may come quickly, and swallow up all the kingdom of earth; that all mankind, receive him for their king, truly believing in his name, may be filled with righteousness, and peace, and joy, with holiness and happiness, till they are removed hence into his heavenly kingdom, there to reign with him for ever and ever. For this also...we pray for the coming of his everlasting kingdom, the kingdom of glory in heaven; which is the continuation and perfection of the kingdom of grace on earth.²⁴

What is this righteousness that comes together with peace and joy? Wesley explains that this righteousness is the fruit of God's reigning in the hearts of human beings. It presents through right disposition of heart, good character, and holy actions. It is 'the life of God in the soul.'²⁵ It is Christ's righteousness imputed to every Christian which follows by the impartation brought by the Holy Spirit. Through this work of the Holy Spirit, the image of God in all Christians will be renewed after the likeness of God.

Wesley holds that righteousness is of fundamental eschatological importance for this is the single requirement to pass through the narrow gate and heading towards the singular pilgrimage of universal righteousness and eternal glory.²⁶

How can human beings receive this godly righteousness? It could not be received through abstaining from outward sin, doing good or using the means of grace, such as going to the church or

²³ Wesley, SM- XIII, §§ II.1-2, *Works*, 1: 691-2.

²⁴ Wesley, SM-VI, § III.8, *Works*, 1: 582.

²⁵ Wesley, Sermon 21, SM-I, §I.11, *Works*, 1: 481.

²⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 31, SM-XI, §§ II. 2-3, III.4-6, *Works*, 1: 668, 672-4.

attending the Lord's Supper. It is received through thirsting for righteousness and being filled freely by the Triune God. Here, we see Wesley's connection of obeying the Sermon on the Mount and experiencing the work of the Triune God. Obeying the Sermon on the Mount without experiencing the work of the Triune God is merely observing the outward forms of religion. It is of no help in receiving the free gift of the righteousness of God.

In order to preserve this righteousness, Wesley urges Christians to observe the way which the Lord has ordained, that is to search the Scripture, to listen and meditate on His word, to fast, to pray, and to partake of the Lord's Supper.²⁷ However, he also cautions Christians to beware of the parent-sins: enmity against God, pride of heart, self-will, and love of the world;²⁸ and other sins which are derived from these such as: levity and thoughtlessness, anger, impatience, discontent, being judgmental, wickedness, zeal of ignorance, and negligence of prayer, for these are the hindrances of holiness.²⁹ Furthermore, Wesley asserts that the Christian's righteousness should exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees in terms of its extent, its purity and spirituality and its fulfilling of the spirit of the law.³⁰

3. The Continuation of the Kingdom's Life

3.1 Serving God with Single Eye

Wesley maintains that the only business of Christians in the world is to serve God with a single eye. What does he mean by the expression: 'serving God with single eye' ? It means serving God with the purity of the intention of the soul according to the scriptural manner. Wesley explains:

The eye is the intention: What the eye is to the body, the intention is to the soul. As the one guides the motions of the body, so does the other those of the soul. This eye of the soul is then said to be single... when we have no other design, but to "know God, and Jesus Christ whom he hath sent," ...to serve God (as we love him) with all

²⁷ John Wesley, Sermon 30, 'SM-X,' §18, *Works*, 1: 659.

²⁸ Wesley, Sermon 31, 'SM-XI,' §I.3, *Works*, 1: 665.

²⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 22, 'SM- II,' §II. 1, *Works*, 1: 495; Wesley, Sermon 30, 'SM-X,' §§4, 15, 18, *Works*, 1: 651ff.

³⁰ John Wesley, Sermon 25, 'SM-V,' §§ IV.10-13, *Works* 1: 567-71.

our heart, and mind, and soul, and strength; and to enjoy God in all.
And above all this, in time and in eternity.³¹

Elsewhere, Wesley points out that to believe,³² to love, to imitate,³³ to obey³⁴ and to glorify Him are the foundations of serving God in spirit and in truth.³⁵ For those who serve God wholeheartedly, their minds will be opened 'to see the glorious love of God.'³⁶ They will be full of true divine knowledge and be filled with holiness as well as happiness. To serve God thus, with a single eye, is the weighty direction for the pilgrimage of Christians on the earth.³⁷

In the pilgrimage of serving God with a single eye, Christians will be renewed to grow in the eight characteristics of being in the Kingdom of Grace. These characteristics are poverty of spirit, godly mourning, Christian meekness, thirsting after righteousness, Christian mercy, purity in heart, peace making and endurance in persecution for the sake of righteousness.³⁸

Wesley considers that poverty of spirit or humility is the foundation of these characteristics. It 'is a just sense of our inward and outward sins, and of our guilt and helplessness.'³⁹ It is also a just sense of yearning for repentance 'which is previous to faith in Christ.'⁴⁰ It is, hence, 'the first step we take in running the race which is set before us.'⁴¹

How should Christians sharpen the focus of their single eye in order to complete the race ahead? By quoting the example of Cornelius (Acts 10: 4ff.), Wesley maintains that it is through fervent

³¹ John Wesley, Sermon 28, 'SM-VIII,' §2, *Works*, 1: 613.

³² To believe in God implies to trust him as our strength, our shield, our happiness and even our end. For more discussion see John Wesley, Sermon 29, 'SM- IX,' §4, *Works*, 1: 634.

³³ Wesley, Sermon 29, 'SM-IX,' §6, *Works*, 1: 635.

³⁴ To obey God is 'to glorify Him with our bodies, as well as with our spirits, to keep His outward commandments, to avoid whatever He has forbidden, to perform the ordinary actions of life with a single eye and a pure heart and to offer them all in holy, fervent love, as sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ.' Wesley, 'SM-IX,' §7, *Works*, 1: 636.

³⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 24, 'SM-IV,' §III.4, *Works*, 1: 543.

³⁶ Wesley, Sermon 28, 'SM-VIII,' §4, *Works*, 1: 614.

³⁷ Wesley, 'SM-VIII,' §§6-9, *Works*, 1: 615-6.

³⁸ For detailed discussion see John Wesley, Sermons 21-23, 'SM- I-III,' *Works*, 1: 469-530.

³⁹ Wesley, 'SM-1,' §I.7, *Works*, 1: 479.

⁴⁰ Wesley, 'SM-1,' §I.4, *Works*, 1: 477.

⁴¹ Wesley, 'SM-1,' §I.7, *Works*, 1: 479.

prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Fasting is a help for prayer that the souls of those who pray will be lifted up and be focused on God. It is also a means which God uses to increase the tenderness of conscience, deadness to the world, holy affection and godly chastity.⁴²

3.2 Love is all in all

It is undeniable that the root of Christian faith lies in 'the union of the soul with God, and the life of God in the soul of man.' However, as Wesley argues, if 'this root be really in the heart, it cannot but put forth branches.'⁴³ Here we see Wesley bringing together Christians' vertical relationship to God (inward righteousness) and their horizontal relationship to human beings in society (outward righteousness).⁴⁴ To him, loving God will eventually lead to loving others in the world. In defining what love is, Wesley expounds 1st Cor. 13:4-7 under the heading of 'be merciful to others' and exhorts Christians to love others with such godly love.⁴⁵

The Lord God fill thy heart with such a love to every soul, that thou mayest be ready to lay down thy life for his sake! May thy soul continually overflow with love, swallowing up every unkind and unholy temper, till he calleth thee up into the region of love, there to reign with him for ever and ever.⁴⁶

For this reason, Christianity is essentially a social religion and it is impossible to conceal it just as the city upon the hill and the lit candle in the house cannot be hidden.⁴⁷ Therefore Christians cannot withdraw from society and still claim that they are living the Christian way of life. To Wesley, to be Christian is to be with God as well as to be with others in society. Christianity could not subsist without God. Likewise, it could not subsist without society.

⁴² John Wesley, Sermon 27, 'SM-VII,' § II.6, *Works*, 1: 600.

⁴³ Wesley, Sermon 24, 'SM-IV,' § III.1, *Works*, 1: 541.

⁴⁴ Wesley considers the separation between inward and outward righteousness as the device of Satan. John Wesley, Sermon 26, 'SM-VI,' §1, *Works*, 1: 572.

⁴⁵ For detailed discussion, see John Wesley, Sermon 22, 'SM-II,' §§ III.4-18, *Works*, 1: 499-509; Wesley, 'SM-XIII,' § III.10, *Works*, 1: 697.

⁴⁶ Wesley, Sermon 22, 'SM-II,' § III.18, *Works*, 1: 507.

⁴⁷ Wesley even goes to the extent of considering that the thought of withdrawal from the world is a deception of Satan. Wesley, Sermon 24, 'SM-IV,' §§4-5, II.7, *Works*, 1: 532-3, 541.

Christians are called to share their hope and love with others, to live out their uniqueness and thus attract others to join the pilgrimage towards the kingdom of God. This is the locality where Christian holiness shines forth its radiance.

Wesley notes:

“Ye are the salt of the earth.” It is your very nature to season whatever is around you. It is the nature of the divine savour which is in you, to spread to whatsoever you touch; to diffuse itself, on every side, to all those among whom you are. This is the great reason why the providence of God has so mingled you together with other men, that whatever grace you have received of God may through you be communicated to others; that every holy temper and word and work of yours may have an influence on them also. By this means a check will, in some measure, be given to the corruption which is in the world, and a small part, at least, be saved from the general infection, and rendered holy and pure before God.⁴⁸

How shall Christians become the salt of the earth? Wesley’s reply is: (i) to live in the world; (ii) to endeavour to shine forth the light of Christian holiness among others; (iii) to be a good steward of every gift of God: to cut off unnecessary expense of time and food, and (iv) to enlarge our abilities of doing good: feeding the hungry and clothing the naked.⁴⁹ The ultimate aim of doing these is that everyone who witnesses them may glorify our Father who is in heaven.

Coming to this point, it is appropriate for us to revisit Wesley’s discussion of Christian meekness, Christian mercy, and peace-making in order to achieve a better understanding of his expression of shining forth the light of Christian holiness among others.

Wesley sees Christians who love God as the meek who obey His will with a calm mind, are patient and content within themselves and mild and gentle toward others.⁵⁰ They are zealous for God but ‘their zeal is always guided by knowledge, and tempered, in every thought, word, and work with the love of man, as well as the love of God.’⁵¹ They will be merciful, ⁵² compassionate and tender hearted

⁴⁸ Wesley, ‘SM-IV,’ § I.7, *Works*, 1: 536.

⁴⁹ Wesley, ‘SM-IV,’ §§ III.7-IV.4, *Works*, 1: 545-9.

⁵⁰ This included the evil and the unthankful. John Wesley, Sermon 22 ‘SM-II,’ § I.4, *Works*, 1: 489; Wesley, ‘SM-XIII,’ § III.8, *Works*, 1: 696.

⁵¹ Wesley, Sermon 22, ‘SM-II,’ § I.7, *Works*, 1: 491.

for those who are yet to hunger after God. Hence, they will be 'angry at sin, but love the sinners.'⁵³

Furthermore, they are peace-makers. To Wesley, the definition of peace determines the nature of peace-making.⁵⁴ Peace-makers concern the holistic needs of human beings. They will treasure the time, seek any opportunity, employ any means or talent to promote reconciliation, increase good-will among people, and bring blessing to others.⁵⁵ Wesley discusses this further:

The peace maker [is] an instrument in God's hand, preparing the ground for his Master's use...According to the measure of grace which he has received, he uses all his diligence, either to reprove the gross sinner...or to "give light to them that sit in the darkness"...or to "support the weak, to lift up the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees" or to bring back and heal that which was lame and turned out of the way. Nor is he less zealous to confirm those who are already striving to enter at the straight gate...that they may "run with patience the race which is set before them"...to exhort them to stir up the gift of God which is in them, that, daily growing in grace, "an entrance may be ministered unto them abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."⁵⁶

Christians are concerned about the real needs of others and finding means to fulfil them. They are called the children of God if they do so in faith, hope and love.

3.3 Endurance in Persecution

Will the children of God who practice peace-making find peace in the world? No; instead they will be persecuted for the sake of righteousness. The reply might appear stunning. Yet it is a fact. Wesley suggests four reasons why this is so: (i) the evil spirit which opposes the work of God instigates those who are of the world to oppose the children of God;⁵⁷ (ii) the mystery of iniquity works

⁵² 'Be merciful' is the term which Wesley employs to sum up the characteristics of those who love their neighbours as themselves. Wesley, 'SM-II,' § III.1, *Works*, 1: 499.

⁵³ Wesley, 'SM-XIII,' § III.8, *Works*, 1: 696.

⁵⁴ Wesley understands 'peace' (εἰρήνη) as 'all manner of good; every blessing that relates either to the soul or the body, to time or eternity.' Wesley, 'SM-II,' § II.2, *Works*, 1: 495.

⁵⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 23, 'SM-III,' §§ II.3-7, *Works*, 1: 517-20.

⁵⁶ Wesley, Sermon 23, 'SM-III,' § II.6, *Works*, 1: 519.

⁵⁷ Wesley, 'SM-III,' § III.4, *Works*, 1: 522; Wesley, 'SM-IV,' § 4, *Works*, 1: 532.

strongly;⁵⁸ (iii) those who are of the world, including those who chose to walk through the wide gate⁵⁹ and the deceptive false prophets,⁶⁰ who submit themselves to the instigation of the evil one and become the instruments of deception and persecution;⁶¹ (iv) God's permission as 'a judgement mixed with mercy; an affliction to punish, and yet a medicine to heal the grievous backsliding of his people.'⁶²

Could Christians try to escape from persecution? Wesley maintains that Christians, on the one hand, should not bring the persecution upon themselves; on the other hand, they should try to avoid it without injuring their conscience or giving up the cause of righteousness.⁶³ However, if they cannot avoid it, they should endure it, forgive and bless the persecutors. Furthermore, they should even stand in the gap to serve as the prophets or the watchmen of the world for this is part of the calling to be Christian and thus part of Christian discipleship.⁶⁴

3.4 Stewardship of Riches

In order to realise the vision of loving God and loving others in society, Wesley maintains that Christians are to 'lay aside all thoughts of obeying two masters, of serving God and mammon.'⁶⁵ But, what is mammon? What does it mean to serve mammon? And why cannot Christians serve God as well as mammon? We need to spend some time to examine this for this is a recurring theme in the sermons of the 'Late Wesley.'⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Wesley, 'SM-III,' § III.5, *Works*, 1: 523.

⁵⁹ Wesley discusses the difference between choosing to walk through the narrow gate and the wide gate in his eleventh discourse on SM. John Wesley, Sermon 31, 'SM-XI,' *Works*, 1: 664-674, see especially §§ II.4-10.

⁶⁰ Wesley discusses the false prophets in his twelfth discourse on SM, Sermon 32, 'SM-XII,' *Works*, 1: 675-86.

⁶¹ Wesley, 'SM-III,' §§ III.4-5, *Works*, 1: 522-5.

⁶² Wesley, 'SM-III,' § III.5, *Works*, 1: 523.

⁶³ Wesley, 'SM-III,' § III.9, *Works*, 1: 526.

⁶⁴ Wesley, 'SM-III,' §§ III.7-12, *Works*, 1: 525-8.; Wesley, 'SM-II,' §§ III.3, III.17, *Works*, 1: 499, 506; Wesley, Sermon 32, 'SM-XII,' §2, *Works*, 1: 675.

⁶⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 29, 'SM- IX,' §15, *Works*, 1: 639.

⁶⁶ Current Wesley scholarship distinguishes Wesley's theological convictions into three classifications: the "early Wesley" (1733-38), the "middle Wesley" (1738-65), and the "late Wesley" (1765-91). However, Randy Maddox's call for consideration of the *whole* Wesley should be noted too because Wesley's "mature" position on many issues coalesced long before 1765. Randy Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 20-21.

According to Wesley, mammon could be understood as riches, money or all that may be purchased.⁶⁷ Thus, serving mammon means trusting such things, trusting them as our strength as well as our help. Trusting mammon, in turns, implies that Christians love the world, trust in the world of happiness, are conformed to and even obey the world. By doing this, Christians are, in fact, thinking highly of the increase of their own wealth and making the world the ultimate end of many of their undertakings.⁶⁸ Serving mammon is, therefore, 'the care of the heart' which hurts either the soul or the body.⁶⁹ Wesley warns:

This care is not only a sore disease, a grievous sickness of soul, but also a heinous offence against God, a sin of the deepest dye. It is a high affront to the gracious Governor and wise Disposer of all things; necessarily implying, that the great judge...does not know what things we stand in need of...does not provide those things for all who put their trust in him.⁷⁰

Could Christians, then, serve both mammon and God? Wesley maintains that we should not and could not because serving mammon is a contradiction to serving God. Eventually, it will cause Christians not to aim singly at God and thus bring destruction, unhappiness and darkness upon them.⁷¹ Christians need to decide either to crucify themselves to the world or to conform themselves to it. However, they cannot choose both for they would have 'no peace either in God or the world.'⁷² Wesley's argument illustrates this vividly:

Does not every man see, that he cannot serve both *consistently* with himself?...He is indeed "a sinner that goeth two ways" one step forward and another backward. He is continually building up with one hand, and pulling down with the other. He loves sin, and he hates it: He is always seeking, and yet always fleeing from, God...He is a motley mixture of all sorts of contrarieties; a heap of contradictions jumbled in one...⁷³

⁶⁷ Wesley, Sermon 29, 'SM-IX,' §4, *Works*, 1: 634.

⁶⁸ Wesley, 'SM-IX,' §8, *Works*, 1: 636.

⁶⁹ Wesley, 'SM-IX,' §17, *Works*, 1: 640.

⁷⁰ Wesley, 'SM-IX,' §17, *Works*, 1: 640.

⁷¹ John Wesley, Sermon 28, 'SM-VIII,' §§8-9, *Works*, 1: 616-8.

⁷² Wesley, 'SM-IX,' §12, *Works*, 1: 637.

⁷³ Wesley, 'SM-IX,' §13, *Works*, 1: 638.

In view of the above discussion, we need to ask a crucial question: how should Christians manage their riches on earth? Wesley's charge is: 'Be wise stewards of the earthly riches in good works, especially in feeding the hungry and clothing the naked.'⁷⁴ His advice in the Discourses could be summarised as following : (i) trust not in riches for help and happiness, (ii) practice 'the care of the head' by proper planning and management,⁷⁵ (iii) do not waste money, (iv) owe no man anything, (v) provide for your own needs, (vi) provide for the present as well the future immediate needs of immediate family members, (vii) lay up (or invest), from time to time, for the above-mentioned purposes, (viii) give to the poor with single eye, (ix) seek not to increase earthly treasures without right purpose, and (x) lend all that remains to those who are in need with preference to the household of faith.⁷⁶

4. The Contemporary Implications

This paper has only explored Wesley's thirteen discourses on the Sermon on the Mount. I am fully aware that these discourses are only part of the writings which record Wesley's understanding of the Christian life. However, these discourses do present to us an initial yet vivid portrait of Wesley's rich vision of the Christian Life. They were written not only for the people in his societies, but also for us who determine to live a responsible life in the contemporary world. They are therefore relevant and of value for contemporary living.

We are living in an age which is full of confusions, anxieties, poverty, fear, hatred, and violence caused by the misuse of riches and power. There are some constant cries which can be heard in the contemporary world: Who can do justice to the poor and suffering? How can we have peace with those who humiliate or persecute us? Do we have a future in a world which is threatened by violence and terrorism? How can we contribute in renewing this world for the betterment of tomorrow?

In the midst of all these queries, Wesley's discourses on SM serve as an evangelical counsel which invite us to focus on the Triune God while we live out responsible living in the contemporary

⁷⁴ Wesley, 'SM-VIII,' §§24-26, *Works*, 1: 628-9; Wesley, 'SM-IV,' §§ III7-IV4, *Works*, 1: 545-9.

⁷⁵ Wesley, 'SM-IX,' §16, *Works*, 1: 639.

⁷⁶ Wesley, 'SM-II,' § III.12, *Works*, 1: 504.

chaotic world. Wesley's attempt to bring together being and doing, the inward and the outward, intention and performance, is 'a call for decision and action.'⁷⁷ It serves as a strong motivation as well as a sound caution. It is a strong motivation for it enables us to understand our pilgrimage on the journey to the Kingdom of Glory. However, it is also a sound caution because it helps us not to fall under the prophetic judgement of 'Mene, Mene, Tekel, Parsin !'⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), 4.

⁷⁸ "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting." (Dan. 5: 25-28 NIV)